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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 001556

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SUBJECT: BALTS REPORT RUSSIAN CHARM OFFENSIVE

REF: VILNIUS 1427

Classified By: POL/ECON OFFICER TREVOR BOYD
FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (C) Summary. Russia has launched a "charm offensive" towards the Baltic states that features new movement on bilateral relations, according to Lithuanian officials and Baltic diplomats here. Lithuanian interlocutors point to recent Russian initiatives on long-stalled issues such as bilateral commissions and on non-security issues like environmental protection. Russian diplomats are privately telling Baltic interlocutors that the new year will bring even friendlier initiatives. Lithuanians, however, see a continued Russian hard line against Baltic/EU efforts to "export" democracy to other parts of the former Soviet Union. Many observers believe the friendlier tone reflects Russia's interest in attracting Baltic participation in WWII commemorative events in May; others believe it is a new tactic aimed at co-opting the Balts for support on Russian interests within NATO and EU councils. Regardless of motive, the Lithuanians will probably aim to exploit new initiatives to maintain constructive relations with Russia, while remain cautious and alert to any encroaching Russian influence that could be a by-product. End Summary.

A Kinder, Gentler Moscow?

2. (C) MFA Russia Division Chief Arunas Vinciusas characterized Russia's recent overtures toward Lithuania as a "charm offensive," and told us that Lithuania has noticed a more cooperative tone from Moscow on issues of bilateral interest. Russia recently announced, for example, that it would appoint a chairperson to the GOL-GOR Intergovernmental Cooperative Commission, following a six-month vacancy. The Commission, the highest GOL-GOR permanent cooperative body, facilitates cooperation on bilateral issues, involving trade, transportation, economic cooperation, science, technology and culture. Russia similarly pledged to name a chair to the bilateral Demarcation Commission, a technical body responsible for delineating the Kaliningrad-Lithuanian border, and the GOR recently affirmed its intention to participate in a joint Baltic Sea and Curonian Lagoon environmental monitoring program in 2005.

Moscow Extends Holiday Cheer toward Estonia and Latvia

3. (C) A local Estonian diplomat told us that Tallinn has also noticed a "dramatic shift" in tone from Russia. After many months of a refusal to meet at the Foreign Ministerial level, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov had recently offered a meeting to his Estonian counterpart. President Putin, for example, also recently announced his intention to conclude negotiation of border treaties with Estonia and Latvia by May 9, 2005. (Note: The Duma ratified the GOL-GOR agreement codifying the Russia/Kaliningrad-Lithuanian border in May 2003.) The diplomat said Russian diplomats in Vilnius have been telling the Lithuanians and Baltic counterparts to expect substantial new goodwill initiatives shortly after the new year.

"Nothing Charming About Russia in Brussels"

4. (C) Despite the new bonhomie on other issues, Russia has changed neither its tone nor its policies on the New Neighborhood or other substantive issues with the EU, or with Lithuania on issues such as Baltic air policing or Kaliningrad, according to Lithuanian diplomats. Mindaugas Kacerauskis, head of MFA's Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus Division noted that Russia remains "very tough" on Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Russia, he said, rejected all EU-sponsored initiatives regarding the "New Neighborhood" at both the November EU-Russia Summit and the OSCE Ministerial in Sofia. Noting "there has been nothing charming about Russia in Brussels," Jonas Grinevicius, head of MFA's NATO Division, said that he was "not impressed" with Russia's cooperation on Ukraine at the recent NATO-Russia Council. Interlocutors point to Putin's involvement with President

Kuchma following the second round of presidential voting in Ukraine, and FM Ivanov's critical comments on Kaliningrad transit issues at NATO's meeting in Bucharest as additional evidence that there has been no change in tone or substance from Moscow.

A May 9 Motive?

15. (C) The goal of the Kremlin's offensive, said Grinevicius, is to convince President Adamkus to participate in events commemorating the 60th anniversary of the end of WWII in Moscow on May 9. To Lithuanians, May 9, the official Soviet Victory Day, signaled the reestablishment of soviet occupation and deportation of up to 300,000 Lithuanian citizens, thousands of executions and 45 years of the subjugation of its language and culture by a foreign occupier (reftel). Raimundas Lopata, Director of the Institute of International Relations, echoed Grinevicius, suggesting that these examples of unc customary, if limited cooperation represent a new strategy directed toward May 9 participation, not a new warmth.

16. (C) Though President Adamkus has told us quietly that it will likely be politically impossible for him to participate in events that appear to mark the anniversary of Soviet occupation of the Baltic countries, the GOL will likely not make a final decision until March 2005. Saulius Gasiunas, Director of MOD's NATO Department said that the GOL is taking a wait-and-see approach, and will see just how far these friendly overtures extend.

17. (C) Others believe the new developments reflect a change in Russian tactics in advancing its longer term strategy of co-opting or weakening NATO and EU influence on Russian interests in Europe. Many of our Baltic interlocutors here remain convinced that Russia continues to view its relations with Europe as a zero-sum game; that any expansion of NATO or EU influence automatically means a diminution of (and threat to) Russian interests. As one Estonian surmised, Russia aims to use its warmer cultivation of the Baltic states as a platform to weaken NATO and EU cohesion.

Comment

18. (C) Regardless of Russia's motives or the durability of its new initiatives to the Baltic states, Lithuanian officials will likely aim to exploit them to keep bilateral relations on a constructive footing, while remaining cautious and alert to any ulterior motives. As Lithuania's new government takes power with the participation of Labor Party leader (and ethnic Russian) Viktor Uspaskich, sensitivity to prospective Russian manipulation of Lithuania is especially high. For example, even Uspaskich himself this week sounded the alarm about the need to protect Lithuania from Russian manipulation.
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